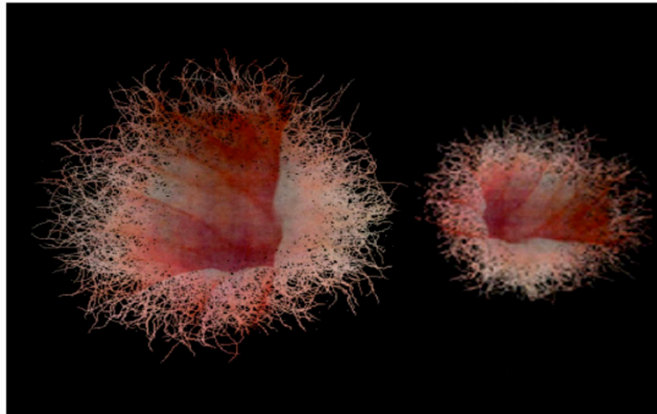


On the occasion of his exhibition *prOtOcOls nOn* (May 30 - June 25, 2012) at Galerie Richard in Paris, Joseph Nechvatal spoke with Taney Roniger about his work.

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GALERIE RICHARD

PARIS NEW YORK



madOnna cOl bambinO (2011) 168 x 112 cm peintures assistées par ordinateur

JOSEPH NECHVATAL  
*prOtOcOls nOn*

May 30 - June 25

**Taney Roniger:** *prOtOcOls nOn* (no rules): You have an interesting relationship with rules, it seems. On the one hand, your work, being digital, is fundamentally rooted in rules, in the binary logic and clockwork rigor of the digital computer, while on the other hand your entire oeuvre seems emphatically oriented in the direction of freedom – freedom from oppressive forces, unexamined conventions, and stultified thinking. Can you talk about the title of your show?

**Joseph Nechvatal:** The suggestion of no rules in the title is a mere provocation to thought. All software runs on strict rules. And of course I want some rules, at times, to be observed in art. Indeed, your question reminds me of some recent events I experienced that illustrate that desire and need.

Earlier this year, I was at the *Fiesta del Corpus* in Granada at the tauromachie, drinking some fino and tinto verando in the sun. I could see the snow-capped mountains of the Sierra Nevadas behind the arena. I was watching Enrique Ponce work a huge and magnificent black bull, a real *bête noire*. What I love about

bullfighting is its complete lack of cynicism. The matador is always deadly serious and noble, as is the audience of aficionados, unless he does something stupid, in which case the crowd whistles to show its disapproval. Even then, it is an art of death without a trace of cynicism, without a trace of irony. It is a classical rule-based art, set in ritualistic repetition ~ with difference.

Anyway, Ponce had done magnificent muleta work with this stately bull, and when it came time for the estocada, he chose the dangerous *al volapié* approach, where the bull charges on its own initiative. This gesture is the hardest and most dangerous one in current bullfighting when properly executed, as the bullfighter loses sight of the bull's horns, which may, in a defensive reaction, raise up and gore him.

There was this dramatic pause, as Ponce waited in the *recibir* position for the charge of the bull, when a young American lad seated behind me loudly cried out “olé”! It was the *most* inappropriate expression imaginable, and a break with the classical rules that horrified me and everyone ~ as it destroyed the *élan* of this classical art form.

The next night, after going to the Alhambra, I went to hear a classical music concert of Bach at Santa Ingesia Cathedral. During a wonderfully sublime passage, someone arrived late to the concert and walked their way to the front of the church to sit down. The only problem was, their shoes made the most ignoble, horrible squeaking sound ~ again destroying the nobility of the moment and the art form.

The point about observing cultural rules I wish to make with my *prOtOcOlS nOn* exhibition, is that, indeed, art may create its own meanings and complex values by breaking expectations. Rules in art, like image logos and short sentences, do not make the hum and buzz of life any simpler. But some steady rules and conventions can prepare us, if we observe them with an educated readiness for openness, for the possibilities of experiencing and capturing the quivering vibrancy of life. This is why I often critique the always-shifting relational aesthetic that seems to hover over many exhibitions these days as a great rule that cannot be questioned. I see relational aesthetics as the relegation of all aspects of art to exchange value, something that more or less sums up bourgeois society. So long as we submit with humility to certain rules of the past, we can actually experience the un-ironic mix of will and daydream that is at the heart of good art. But I want to close my answer with a final recollection from that recent trip to Andalusia. After Granada, I went to Ronda to visit the Plaza de Toros, where I saw a blind man, cane in hand, slowly walking his way down the Orsen Wells path that leads directly to a steep cliff edge ~ providing me with a beautiful vista. I was ready to shout out ~ not “olé” but perhaps “señor” ~ to alert him to his danger, when at the very last moment he swerved to his left and avoided a fall at the cliff. He must have been counting off his paces ~ and playing with death by his own rules.

**Taney Roniger:** I love your evocation of the ritualistic solemnity of bullfighting - without which, I suppose, the whole thing would devolve into mere blood sport. Ritual – whether religious or otherwise – seems the very paragon of the prescribed endeavor, but one where adherence to the rules is intended to promote not mindless obedience, but a kind of self-expansion, or self-transcendence. On the subject of rules, I want to ask you about Manuel DeLanda, because I know he’s been influential for you. His automata

theory, which explores the cellular automaton as a general principle underlying the evolution of the universe, presents a convincing challenge to the view that clockwork mechanisms (i.e., rules) can't possibly account for the complexity, diversity, and splendor of our world. Even early emergentists were skeptical, I understand. Can you talk about what you find so philosophically potent about his work and its relation to yours?

Joseph Nechvatal: Reading DeLanda's book *Philosophy and Simulation*, I was very taken by how my work for *prOtOcOlS nOn* connected with his exploration of simulations of emergence in systems of different scales, from the atomic to the social. As an artist, the concept of *emergence* is particularly interesting because of the dynamic qualities implied by the individual mechanisms of emergence. Distinct concepts of properties, tendencies, and capacities suggested to me an art that is conceptually flexible and ephemeral, yet materially imbedded, if not always fully visible, into structural objects. This was an epiphany for me, and especially interesting because it rubs up against my larger *viractual* project. The idea that a virtual possibility can be a result of actual material properties, tendencies, and capacities ~ and not always/only the other way around ~ helped me reach a higher degree of chance-based rule decision-making for my art.

**Taney Roniger:** What were some of your other influences?

Joseph Nechvatal: While working on *prOtOcOlS nOn* I was listening nonstop to the avant-garde sax music of Roland Kirk and the great John Coltrane.

**Taney Roniger:** And Speculative Realism? Did that play a role?

Joseph Nechvatal: Yeah. I'd already been reading Speculative Realism the year before, specifically Quentin Meillassoux's book *After Finitude*, which is the one that got me started on the Speculative Realism trail. I refer to *After Finitude* in my own book *Immersion Into Noise*. Actually, Meillassoux prepared me for DeLanda.

**Taney Roniger:** It seems there is, with Speculative Realism, a reintroduction of metaphysics into a climate that's been hostile toward it for some time now. Is metaphysics okay again now?

Joseph Nechvatal: Yep. I think that's the key thing. You know as a movement it is a real hodge-podge. And in fact, Ray Brassier ~ who is the translator of the Quentin Meillassoux book, and who I've read on nihilism and noise music ~ actually says that it's not a movement. That you can't lump these philosophers together. Speculative Realism contains object oriented ontology, and neo-vitalism, and transcendental materialism, and even science fiction. Depending on how rigid you are as a philosopher, you could be put off by that. But as an artist prepared for this by reading Gilles Deleuze, it works, because for Deleuze

philosophy is the creation of new concepts.

**Taney Roniger:** I recently read Bruno Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern*, and I was struck by what seems to be a movement toward becoming a little bit more friendly toward the object world – the non-human realm. It's not entirely off limits to us anymore, in other words – with our subjectivity “over here,” and it “over there.” That perhaps the twain can meet after all...

Joseph Nechvatal: ... yes, that is central to the Speculative Realists too. Their jumping off point is refuting Kant, of course. Kantian correlationism is the big bugaboo they're trying to escape. Correlationism assumes that we can only understand the world through our subjective human spectrum of perception. Speculative Realists say a big NO to that, and I agree with them here, which puts us in the post-human camp. I agree that the viral world, for example, is both much smaller and much bigger than us. That viral perspective for art brings it back towards the sublime ~ and the transcendental metaphysics behind it. So, in a nutshell, Speculative Realists basically say that we have to explore being ~ what they call ontology ~ outside of conventional Kantian strictures.

**Taney Roniger:** And that we can do that; it's not beyond our capacities?

Joseph Nechvatal: Science fiction and speculation and art are all part of that quest, because Speculative Realists are very much into natural and mathematical systems, the planetary environment, and the depths of the cosmos ~ areas that we have to explore and try to comprehend. Sure, it is tough. That is what is for, I think.

**Taney Roniger:** I see so many parallels between what you're talking about and your working process. Here's my understanding of your process, and correct me if I'm wrong: You and your programmer assistant author a piece of viral code, which is then inserted into a selected image from your database of previous works. As the viral code transforms the image by altering its colors and configurations, you select “stills” from the process, from which paintings will be made. During the painting process, your hand does not touch the canvas; rather, the application of paint is made by a robotic device acting on commands issued by computer.

The whole thing strikes me as a sort of wonderful dance – a dialectic, perhaps – between human agency and non-human processes. You don't seem to privilege one over the other; it's just this back and forth. Right?

Joseph Nechvatal: I would never say dialectic ~ because I don't believe in dialectics. Deleuze completely cured me of the back-and-forth of dialectics. It's too limiting a dance for art theory, because, in reality, I find a million little differences between polar opposites ~ micro-areas that are far more rich and interesting

and complex. So I would say: dialogue, but not a dialectic. A dialogue dance, if you will.

**Taney Roniger:** When you're selecting your host images for a viral attack, is it significant that they're always your own images, your own prior works?

Joseph Nechvatal: Yes. The only other example I used in an attack was two paintings of Andy Warhol's money paintings, which I just did for a short little YouTube post for the Occupy Wall Street blog. Otherwise, no. It's got to be within the family of my own work. It's not applicable for all things, in my mind ~ or it would lose its meaning. It would dilute its magical power.

**Taney Roniger:** I see. You could take an image from anywhere out there in the culture and infect it. You could conceivably do this to any image, right? And interesting things would happen?

Joseph Nechvatal: Absolutely. It could host any damn image. But the question, for me, is why? I would be worried about losing focus and the impact of my virus project getting lost. If it's any image host, then why anyone image? I'm trying to maintain the virus project function as strictly fine art. I think I talked about that in the introduction of my book *Immersion Into Noise* ~ that it's important to maintain this "highness" ~ even if artificially constructed ~ for art to be something 'other' thus capable of critique. For me, art is a form of ideology. That's what good artists are supposed to do: challenge our ways of thinking.

**Taney Roniger:** That certainly comes across in your work. So thinking about thinking is really important?

Joseph Nechvatal: I think so. That's why I try not to make too much of a division between my philosophizing and my artistic creation. I mean, I'm not a philosopher ~ hard-core. But Nietzsche himself said that the ideal philosopher would be an artist. That would be me and I'm trying to live that out by keeping it moving back and forth between categories ~ but not looking for homogenization ~ rather looking for those important subtle differences which make for creation ~ that suggest new avenues of creation. For me, difference is the way towards novelty.

Counter to postmodernism, I believe that art should try to be something novel, and I believe in innovation and invention. I don't fall prey to the postmodernist myth of stasis and decay and repetition and simulation. That's a death trap you can fall in if you want to ~ but I don't want to go there.

**Taney Roniger:** In your first book, *Towards an Immersive Intelligence*, you explored the shift in ontology that you saw emerging as a result of a nascent immersive consciousness connected to virtual reality. How did your interest in immersion come about, and how did it come to focus on noise, which is the subject of your *Immersion Into Noise* book?

Joseph Nechvatal: It started, first of all, with my ideal way of looking at most paintings ~ how you might mentally enter a painting. As you know, Kandinsky said he wanted the viewer to enter and explore ~ be in ~ his painting. So already, at a young age, I got that and was on board with that goal. I think it is making use of your imagination to give a painting your all and just get into it. To drop what you're doing and go there. But then it got more specific with my research with Roy Ascott for my Ph.D. ~ for that I wanted to take that immersive use of the mind and see how it could apply to new virtualizing technology. So I started to study virtual reality and its ideals in those terms.

The idea for virtual reality is that you're immersed into a virtual world which you can navigate. I did my thesis on that topic ~ so I revisited art history and the history of architecture and ritual and different cultural manifestations through the wide lens of immersion. What I came to call the immersive impulse ~ our desire for immersion with the head-mounted device.

Later I applied surround-sound immersion audio technology to my noise music piece *viral symphony*. Then I started to write on the history of noise music and that's what led me to the book about immersion into the art of noise. I could use some of the lessons I had learned from the VR research: ideas about environment and ambience ~ pushing our artistic sensibilities even behind our heads ~ as well as in front of our eyes. And that was a major basis of *Immersion Into Noise*.

**Taney Roniger:** What I see underlying your whole project is a kind of syncretistic vision in constant search of destabilizing rigid polarities. But it's not like you're bringing the two poles together in order to form some third neither-here-nor-there thing; you're putting the two together in a kind of dynamic tension...

Joseph Nechvatal: ...dynamic tension! Yes! Beautiful. That's the art of noise aspect. Good art has to have a tension of provocation.

**Taney Roniger:** I think that's a really important distinction to make. It's not the unification of the two, it's the tension between them.

Joseph Nechvatal: I think it's more artistic and intellectual to perceive minute differences. That's what a connoisseur does. I think that's the real payoff for the earned cultural knowledge that things can be contradictory and true simultaneously.

**Taney Roniger:** Right!

Joseph Nechvatal: If you've got that, then your life opens up and you're far more tolerant and understanding ~ and a better and wiser human being.

**Taney Roniger:** Another thing that I definitely want to ask you about is digitization. You've called it "the universal technical platform for networked capitalism." It's also your chosen artistic language. Can you talk a little bit about what makes it the ideal language for you?

Joseph Nechvatal: It's the idea of the Trojan horse. If you're going to be an agent of political consciousness, of resistant awareness, of non-acceptance, you have to work within the language of power. Otherwise, you're immediately marginalized and cast aside. So I think good politically conscious art must act as a Trojan horse ~ you have to enter the larger social dialogue, use the vocabulary, the system, the semiotics of power ~ and then from there ~ subvert.

In other words, you can't subvert from the outside. You have to subvert from the inside. This is the thinking I learned from Jean Baudrillard. Now, I don't agree with a lot of Baudrillard, but I do think he was right in this case about subversion from within.

That's really why I started doing the big blow-ups and got into the computer. If you read my artist's statement from *Documenta VIII*, it's all about this subversion. Yes, I'm using the computer because the computer IS the dominant language of military economics, and we have to confront it head-on. So my art is a kind of social-political realism fairyland.

Of course, you have to be very careful with that ~ it's easy to make an avant-garde stance and then end up just being swept up inside of slick production that plays along with the power themes ~ so that all of your criticality is glossed over. It's hard enough already maintaining criticality in cultural productions, but once you're inside the slick game, you have to *really* be subversive.

For me, of course, it comes down to the imagery ~ that's really why I decided the anus was an important image host for *prOtOcOlS nOn*. It is not intended as a sexual or provocative or funny image ~ but a key portal to poke into the post-industrial information age.

**Taney Roniger:** You've talked about things like "digital fluidity," which is in some sense an oxymoron. You know what I mean? Because digital language is binary. So it strikes me as curious that if what you're after is in some sense exposing the fallacy of rigid binary thinking that your chosen language is itself binary.

Joseph Nechvatal: Indeed, string of zeros and ones underlying everything digital ~ you can't get more binary than that. I totally agree. But, for example, water is made up of certain chemicals ~ but what we do with water varies drastically: we swim in it, we brush our teeth with it, we pee in it... It's undeniable that zeros and ones make up the structure of the digital medium, but I think it's almost not important because the medium is so fluid.

**Taney Roniger:** Well, talk about the fluidity, then. As a medium, it does lend itself to a certain...

Joseph Nechvatal: ...transformational metamorphosis?

**Taney Roniger:** Yes.

Joseph Nechvatal: Oh yes. You can take the same data that's being produced and output as a visual or as an audio production. It's easy then to convert that data into something else. You just change the parameters. It's very, very easy to do – almost too easy.

The question always comes down to: What are you doing it for? So, when we think of our digital age ~ the fluidity of the internet, the networked connectivity ~ we think of flows of data. But for me it's an interest in fluid human potentiality too, which is one of the reasons I got interested in cyber culture in the early 90s. It seemed like the current platform for transformation ~ and that folded me back into my interests in Classical Greek poetry. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in particular ~ where things become other things ~ and flowers become people ~ and people become clouds ~ this kind of super-fluidity which we experience in dreams sometimes. A dream like that has the power of a poetic metaphor ~ one needed for realizing our human potentiality and our full sensibilities towards our real life ~ the real people in our lives ~ our real politics ~ how we live our lives economically ~ and the decisions we make in the real world.

So in that sense I'm a materialist. Actually, that's why I became interested in Speculative Realism, because they don't shy away from what they call *transcendental materialism* ~ which I think kind of nails what I've been feeling ~ and groping for. It sounds oxymoronic, and certainly paradoxical ~ but maybe not!

Anyway, that kind of idea of fluid human potentiality interests me a great deal. And I think that's the reason we have great art ~ to change consciousness through fluidity.

**Taney Roniger:** That was actually going to be my next question. Because I feel like it's so important to your project: this idea of self-reprogrammability. I mean, that is such a crucial insight – that we can change, that we can be liberated from our conditioning. At a time when we're flanked on all sides by so many determinisms.

Joseph Nechvatal: Exactly. The human spirit is being tamped down and down and down. We must, through art, strive to overcome that bullshit. We are in a metaphysical battle ~ and each person ~ each woman and each man ~ is a soldier on the battlefield of culture.

**Taney Roniger:** And you feel that – this potential to change – when you're with not only your own work, but when you have a profound experience with another work? You feel that it's changed you in some way?

Joseph Nechvatal: I do. Almost chemically. And it stays with you ~ not that we don't outgrow our appreciation of certain artworks. In my case, when I was around 20, I had a passion for Jasper Johns. I just couldn't get enough of his work. I was in love with him ~ you could almost say. But then I outgrew it, you



know? So that's part of the maturation period, I guess.

**Taney Roniger:** Let's turn back to *Immersion Into Noise*. I just want to say that I found the chapter on Paleolithic cave art, where you describe your descent into the Lascaux cave so moving and so powerful.

Joseph Nechvatal: Thank you. I think that's sort of the core of the book. The merits of visual noise are based on my experiences in Lascaux.

**Taney Roniger:** One of the things I was struck by in this chapter was the element of danger inherent in making the descent into those caves. I mean, it wasn't exactly like stepping into the studio for a day's work for these early artists. I wonder if there's something of that element of danger, or fear, or incomprehensible enormousness that attracts us to the internet. I think you've touched on this somewhere.

Joseph Nechvatal: I have written about how computers stimulate us ~ almost like sublime vastness ~ which is both enticing and scary. Your typical sublime reaction to enormity is a mixture of attraction and repulsion, that I find in the transcendental black metal music of Liturgy. They're connecting music back to the vastness of wild nature ~ with almost Wagnerian intentionality.

**Taney Roniger:** You clearly travel a lot. Travel is incredibly immersive. Right?

Joseph Nechvatal: Yes, it's inherently immersive. Couple that with reading about where you are now ~ and the history of where you've been ~ and I think that's true knowledge ~ having physical experiences in space and natural light of cultural things ~ and the wine and food.

**Taney Roniger:** That's the thing. It doesn't have to be an installation environment for you to experience immersion.

Joseph Nechvatal: Right. I tend to use all-over composition for that feel in my paintings ~ that suggests something could go on forever.

That's what Allen Kaprow saw in Jackson Pollock's show at Betty Parson's gallery ~ where he said: "Okay, I understand. It goes around the whole room, meaning it's all the world, meaning it's the street, meaning it's a happening." That's where he got his idea to create the happening ~ it was from seeing the Pollock show. So this idea of expansion, of distribution, of availability ~ all around us ~ is really a suggestion that is important to my paintings.

**Taney Roniger:** So the *prOtOcOlS nOn* paintings, these are still part of your *Computer Virus Project*?

Joseph Nechvatal: Yes. Almost everything is. Everything I make has something to do with the artificial life viral model technique. I don't necessarily forefront the viral aspect of it all the time ~ but it's impossible to leave it out because the viral technique is very valuable for getting unexpected new art results.

**Taney Roniger:** To what extent is it important that people know how the paintings are made – your process, your involvement with artificial intelligence, etc.?

Joseph Nechvatal: Important ~ and then I hope they'll forget it. Because I want them to go to their own place with them. I don't want to over-determine the interpretation of my work. At the same time, I don't want to deny where it came from or how it's done ~ the viractual materiality it's embedded in. But it's more than that too ~ so I don't want to be self-limiting ~ I don't want to limit the viewer. It's complicated.

**Taney Roniger:** I see such a consistency across all your various media. Your prose style in *Immersion Into Noise*, for example, is characteristically syncretistic, non-linear, and all-over. In other words, it's noisy.

Joseph Nechvatal: Yeah. I thought it would have been silly to write in a strictly academic style when you're exploring something that is the opposite of that.

**Taney Roniger:** It's not like its stream-of-consciousness, with no punctuation... There's certainly a structure there, but the voice is ecstatic, personal, mercurial, even. And the text moves in unexpected directions.

Joseph Nechvatal: I agree with you. I think it's my allover approach to life that provides a moveable aspect to the book and now the *prOtOcOlS nOn* show.

**Taney Roniger:** You make it explicit that your subject matter is ideology.

Joseph Nechvatal: Yeah. That started back with my early drawings. That's why I started to draw from cliché images and overload them in excess. When you look carefully at some of those early gray drawings, they're pile-ups of biblical imagery and *Playboy* imagery and military or macho man cowboys because I was trying to work on cultural ideology and the visual language of power in which it's spoken.

**Taney Roniger:** I know a lot of artists who wouldn't want to admit that their work carries with it an ideology.

Joseph Nechvatal: Because I think we're talking about our own upbringing, our childhood, our relationship to our parents. That's the power of scrutiny and self-reflectivity. That's how you can get to reprogram

yourself. First you have to know what you don't want to do, who did it to you, and then stop doing it.

**Taney Roniger:** So, that's what self-transcendence means to you – moving beyond our unreflective cognitive habits, our conventional notions of the self, our utilitarian consciousness?

Joseph Nechvatal: Yes ~ and that includes a kind of connection to the immanence of nature and materiality ~ the full vibratory spectrum. That is where it gets back to Speculative Realism, to understanding the limits of our perceptual spectrum ~ and at the same time acknowledging that reality and being are beyond us ~ while we still see it in its own terms.

**Taney Roniger:** That seems crucial.

Joseph Nechvatal: I think that's an important understanding ~ particularly in urban life ~ for people to reflect on. I hope that's what they'll get from the *prOtOcOlS nOn* show. That's what my intention is – that urbanites, sophisticated art viewers, will for one instance think about the grander beyond that and have appreciation of it. The great outdoors ~ indoor. Yeah, connecting the anus to the cosmos is for that purpose. To place an extremely personal, sensitive, human aspect, in a poetic marriage to that divine humongous “beyond us.”

**Taney Roniger:** Huston Smith comes to mind: “The larger the island of knowledge, the longer the shoreline of wonder.” Always expanding, but with full knowledge that there's always that “magnificent more,” as you say.

Joseph Nechvatal: Cool. I see it in some young artists who are really trying to work with getting back to respecting the enormity of nature. And of course it has everything to do with a kind of dialogue with cyber culture. The insufficiency of cyber-interactivity and networking ~ and all that. No one ever said that would be the be all and end all of life.

**Taney Roniger:** I'd like to end with a question about the rise of sci-art we've been witnessing over the last decade, or so. In her book *Art & Science*, Sian Ede points to a fundamental rift between art and science today that has its roots in two very different epistemological approaches to knowledge. Science, as she puts it, has always been founded on the belief that there is an “implicit reality” out there to be discovered, while in the arts, that view is pretty much anathema. In our field, the idea that everything (including science) is a “construct” seems to be the prevailing view; knowledge and meaning are inherently slippery, unfixed, culturally and historically conditioned. I'm wondering, given your interest in the nexus of art and science, what your view of the situation is. Do you see the current increase in sci-art collaborations – or “science-based” art – as a promising move that might take us beyond this epistemological impasse?

Joseph Nechvatal: Explicitly theoretical discourses ~ such as science, but also philosophy ~ have no problems finding phenomena which may accommodate them with different sorts of practices. On the contrary, there are many who see these hybrids not to be the exception, but the rule ~ for example, Bruno LaTour in *We Have Never Been Modern*. In other words, in a certain sense, of course sci-art combines opposing theory and practice and may serve as proof of the fact that theory and practice are not opposed in any field. But so do many other social and political phenomena.

Some maintain that this combination does not prove anything against theorists who still try to avoid all contact with intuitive practice, because it is the pursuits of both pure theory and purely intuitive practice which ends up allowing for such combinations ~ such as that which takes place in sci-art. They would say that it is the idea that there are two separated realms of the symbolic and the imaginary which ultimately invites and makes the transgression of the boundary between them possible. However, when art tends towards a dependence on the constructs of scientific theory, that may be a loss in its powerful freedom to imagine the unreasonable.